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The Collector and Art Critic

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE ARTS
AND CRAFTS, BIBLIOGRAPHY, ETC.

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The painter is a creator. He grasps the elements of Nature and moulds these to his own design. He wrests the heat from the sun and forms the liquid fire into the glow of his sunsets; he grapples at the boulders, rocks, torrents, and mighty oaks, and plants them in his own valley; and the branches sway and the torrents roar, and the rocks their rugged sides lay bare against the blasts of hurricane, which he again calls forth when, dipping into the atmosphere about, he pours out moisture, rain and storm and wind. Or then, again, the gentle zephyr whispers and softly sways the ears of grain, and light-beams thrill at his command.

"To him who in the love of nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language."

That language is to us interpreted by nature's prophet, the painter.

* * *

Many a promising, favored painter seems to be loitering on the way. The energies of a well patronized artist sometimes appear to be deadened by the patronage extended to his present attainments. There is no progression apparent, and the worthy pursuit to emulate and rival the masters that have gone before simulates to be quiescent. Is it?

Where there is display of an energetic hand, largeness of style, vigor of composition, it is safe to suspect latent power. Power which is not always demonstrative, but which is there, just the same. Then when the earnest studies, the multitudinous sketches have been made for years, we see suddenly a work appearing so vastly differing and in advance of anything before shown, that it seems to be the work of another man. What has for long been simmering in chaotic disturbance in the artistic brain has suddenly settled, become congealed, precipitates itself into a new creation, crystallizes into a gem, and the man has stepped on to another and higher plane—where again he may linger for many years. These are the periods in an artist's career.

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In judging of pictures, we must not always go by hard and fast rules. Take an individual man who strikes out in an unbeaten path, and gives a conception of nature such as has not been seen. It is manifestly wrong to gauge him by what has been done before. Many young men have been held down, perhaps were never appreciated, because of the narrowmindedness of those who sat in judgment on their work.

We must in all fairness look for work that is, either in composition or execution, original, and, in manner, unique. The imagination of a young

and promising artist often carries him beyond the boundaries of truth. A licentious departure from the authority of long and firmly established ruts by no means disqualifies a man to the attainment of eminence. Aberrations from the sober dignity of academic composition and style must be watched and generously upheld. And be it said to the credit of collectors and art lovers that many of our prominent artists to-day found their place through the munificent support of some patron who was far-sighted enough to believe in his protégé.

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The greatest danger in the career of young artists comes at the beginning. When they have given evidence of talent, and a measure of success has attended their efforts, the danger arises that they become satisfied with themselves. Then development ceases. They may think: People like my work, why change, why seek for a new manner? The error is grievous. There is no man who ever attains to prominence but who remains a student always, and unceasingly seeks to explore the fields in which he has entered.

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There is more æsthetic bottom to the average American than he is usually given credit for. The American, perhaps as unconscious relaxation from his national traits of thrift and enterprise, loves art. And although his half-fledged knowledge may lean him to the pitfalls of undeveloped culture, which is his drawback to catholic comprehension of higher art, we find that the least aid in the right direction is immediately appreciated and followed. His crude knowledge by his susceptibility speedily becomes experience.

Look at the private collections. Without a single exception, early purchases are soon superseded by acquisitions which declare æsthetic influences, and uprooted prejudices show the free range of taste.

It is indicated by his appreciation of "old pictures." These have a charm all their own, for the "Old Masters" are the bedrock of artistic expression, and a searching appreciation of the work of the men of to-day rests, to a greater extent than is supposed, on an understanding and analysis of the products of former schools.

Those who desire to make keener their mental fibre, or forego the lassitude of life, or provide a life-buoy in the whirling eddies of business enterprise, can do no better than devote their leisure moments to the study of the sublime, which, according to Longinus, is the highest excellence that human composition can attain to.

But as well take a blind man to the Bay of Naples or place him before the Victoria Regia in blossom. To know beauty understandingly it must be traced to its source, Nature, and thence to its counterfeit, Art. And it can best be understood by studying the Masters, those who have excelled in the presentations of the affairs of human life, in the translation of landscape to canvas, or in the delineation of the human countenance; from Michael Angelo to Watteau, from Nicolas Poussin to Constable, from Van Dyck to Gainsborough. This is the best method to become a connoisseur, a critic, a judicious collector.

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There is an increasing demand for old masters. It may be that this predilection arises from a pleasing reverence for the works of our forefathers, but it has gradually become a matter of fashion, and, as a general thing, is entirely lacking in that critical understanding which, in the old times, preferred only that which was really beautiful and worth preservation. Old and beautiful are not synonymous; nor are all works of the Renaissance or of later periods desirable. All old pictures with murky tones, fine, crusted surfaces, cracked, shriveled, varnished and revarnished,

lined and relined, are not affiliated to their attributions. There is no more fascinating pursuit, apparently, than the hunting for bargains in pictures, and just here it is where the collector needs beware. The picture-forgery has been industriously at work. We all remember the sensation created some years ago by the discovery of an establishment where bogus Courbets were painted. Mlle. Courbet, the sister of the celebrated painter, Gustave Courbet, noticed in the catalogue of a large sale of paintings announced to be held at Brussels, one of "a standing portrait of Courbet's sister, by her brother." She went to Brussels to look at this art treasure, and saw at once that the painting was not of herself, but of some other woman. Further investigation disclosed that the picture was a forgery, and that it was not the work of Gustave Courbet. Still further inquiry revealed that a picture dealer in Brussels, who also had a store in Paris, was offering for sale a quantity of paintings signed by great masters like Courbet, Corot, and Troyon, not one of which was genuine. The dealer himself had ordered them to be painted by some minor artists, each of whom made a specialty of counterfeiting some celebrated painter, and two of whom were employed particularly on imitations of Courbet's work. One of these had been a pupil of Gustave Courbet, and had succeeded in almost perfectly imitating the latter's style; so much so that one of the counterfeits was admitted to the Paris salon and another was the one offered for sale by the Brussels dealer.

There is scarcely a gallery, public or private, in the United States worth speaking about that does not have copies of the works of Corot, Daubigny, Troyon, and alleged paintings of Diaz. It is amazing that so many small collections, seldom heard of, claim to have two or three Corots, and Daubignys and Troyons by the half-dozen. The entire works of Daubigny—sketches and paintings—aggregate something like seven hundred, yet there are said to be over three thousand among the public and private collections in the United States alone. The obvious inference is that not one in five of the Daubignys in this country is genuine, probably one in ten would be a better estimate.

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Art is one thing, fine arts quite another. They have two essentials in common—intellectual power and technical power. Fine art is distinguished by a coördinate third element—spiritual power. Art in its highest type is the embodiment of a mighty idea; fine art at its best is the expression of a superhuman ideal. A classification of this kind sternly excludes much in marble, bronze and color which passes current in the world for "art" and "fine art." It relegates to a nondescript class all purely imitative work, all superficial work of whatever kind, and all work which nurtures delight in things unworthy.

Technique of itself and for its own sake is futile. It is good in correlation with an exalted purpose, just as bodily strength is good only when well used. Otherwise it is a good thing ill applied, as gold spikes would be in railway construction. The expression of a great idea requires equivalent technical ability. An eternal truth is never born naked, to be swaddled by foster parents. It comes forth in the glory of appropriate symbols. Little men have no vast ideas, and it is vain to study their manners and methods. Where works of art are abundant, a safe rule is to pass pictures and sculptures which do not spontaneously suggest new truths or new meanings of old truths. Discover first the idea and define it clearly. Then learn how the artist expressed it. Finally, inquire whether it might have been done better, searching your own fancy for fitter symbols. Go away with a sense of delight in the beauty of the truth itself and in the power of its expression, and you may honestly say that you understand the language of graphic art.